The New York Times bestselling series



RAPID FIRE 4

CRUSHED

CLIFFORD RILEY

The New York Times bestselling series RAPID FIRE 4 CRUSHED CLIFFORD RILEY



CLIFFORD RILEY

SCHOLASTIC INC.

NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON AUCKLAND SYDNEY MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

CLASSIFIED!

UNLOCK A TOP SECRET FILE ABOUT THE CAHILLS' DEADLIEST ENEMY —

THE VESPERS!

- 1. The seven Rapid Fire stories each contain a fragment of a code.

 Collect the fragments in order to assemble a complete ten-digit code.
- 2. Go to www.the39clues.com.
- 3. Click on "My Cards."
- 4. Enter the ten-digit Rapid Fire code to unlock a digital card and Top Secret Vesper file!

The code fragment for this story is: **R**

Are you ready to save the world?



Contents

Cover

Title Page

Code

Crushed

Copyright



Seven Months After the Clue Hunt

Ian Kabra looked in the mirror, cleared his throat, and bared his soul.

"Amy," he began. And paused. "Amy. Amy, I have to — I have to tell you that . . ." He stopped, rubbed his face, and pushed his shoulders back. "Amy Cahill, I find you interesting."

No, it wasn't that she was just interesting. She was . . . something.

There were so many things wrong with her — so many things that he shouldn't like about her. She was richer than he was these days, and yet she still acted so poor. And far too many of her clothes were made of cotton, rather than silk.

But he found that he almost didn't care. He looked back at the mirror. "I know it's completely ridiculous, but I can't keep quiet about it any longer. Your closet looks like it was put together by a blind nun, and your brother acts like a cross between a monkey and a go-kart, and you have the social skills of a rock. But I like you, Amy. Quite — quite a bit." He paused. "So, congratulations."

His bedroom door swung open, and Natalie stood in the door frame. Ian jumped back from the mirror, but he couldn't meet his sister's eye.

"Really?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips. "Really, Ian?"

"What?" he asked, lifting his shoulders as if there were nothing in the world strange about giving a speech to one's mirror before traveling internationally to declare one's affection to a former nemesis.

He scratched the back of his head. All right, it was strange. And made worse by being caught by his little sister. But he was sixteen years old, and a Kabra — shouldn't he be better at this? Shouldn't he know the exact words to say that would make Amy Cahill realize what he meant? That he liked her, regardless of certain extraneous factors.

"You really think she's going to fall for that?" asked Natalie. "You might as well not go."

Ian sighed. There was nothing normal about being a Kabra — from the mansion to the private jets to the private dinners with the Queen — but there seemed to be something universal about the way little sisters could be such pests.

"I'm going, Natalie," said Ian. "We've talked about this before."

"Fine. Go and make a fool of yourself," Natalie said, shrugging.

"Why don't you go shop for a private island or something?" he snapped.

Natalie's eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. "You *know* I can't. Why would you say something so *mean*?" she gasped. She turned and fled down the hall, leaving Ian to look between the hall and the mirror.

He was going to America. He was going to tell Amy Cahill how he felt. He hadn't before because he thought there was no way those feelings would last. But they had. It was pathetic, he knew that. And it was entirely un-Kabra-like. Natalie's reaction was proof enough of that. Still, there was no point in keeping the news from Amy. She'd be thrilled, and she needed some good news in her life.

Ian left his room and wandered down the Kabra mansion's lofty and well-decorated halls. Brilliant chandeliers hung from the ceiling, the light reflecting off of the highly polished wood floors. Masterpieces by famous relatives — Van Gogh, Picasso, Degas, and Rembrandt to name only a few — hung on the walls. Ian and Natalie had practically grown up in a museum, but rather than being intimidated by their home, they reveled in it. There was no tiptoeing around these works of art. They not only owned these things; they deserved them.

Or at least, they had. Ian wasn't so sure how things worked anymore.

He found Natalie watching television in the theater. Ian joined her, sinking down into one of the plush velvet chairs. The butler was in his usual tailcoat, making popcorn in the corner.

"Bickerduff," said Ian, "we'll be packing later tonight. I'm going to America in a few days."

"Very good, sir," said Bickerduff, bringing the popcorn to the two Kabras.

Natalie threw a look at her brother that would have withered a lesser man. "Like I said, you'd better get a better speech, or I wouldn't even bother."

Ian ignored her. Just because she had her opinions didn't mean that they were correct.

Natalie didn't like being ignored. She snatched up the remote and jabbed at the buttons. The channels on the wall-sized screen flashed from station to station.

```
"More Weetabix—"
"Doctor!"
"Isabel Kabra—"
```

"Downton—"

"Wait, go back," Ian cried. Natalie flipped back to BBC1, where their mother's face was spread across the massive screen. The Kabras leaned forward; Ian's heart rate ticked upward, as if he were being chased.

"Known to many as a fashionable fixture in the philanthropic and art scenes, Isabel Kabra shocked the world when she was arrested last year for the murder of Americans Hope Cahill and Arthur Trent. Now we've received reports that Mrs. Kabra has been released from the custody of her American prison and will be serving out her parole by heading AidWorks Wonders, a charitable organization. The conditions of Mrs. Kabra's parole will limit her movements to Boston, the same region where she committed murder eight years ago."

Natalie turned the television off, and the Kabras sat quietly for a moment, letting the realization sink in: Their mother was out of jail. Ian went cold, and goose bumps popped up on his arms and neck.

Just six months ago, there was little Ian Kabra wouldn't do to gain an edge in the hunt for the 39 Clues: the quest for the secret that would make the finder the most powerful person in the world. The contest had taken the participants, which included Ian and Natalie and Amy and Dan Cahill, to the farthest corners of the globe and had nearly killed them all on multiple occasions.

Isabel had wanted that ultimate power, and she'd done despicable things in her effort to find the Clues and to win. She'd murdered Amy and Dan's parents; she'd shot Natalie, her own daughter, in the foot. She'd *shot* her. Ian knew his mother better than almost anyone else could, and even he had trouble believing it had actually happened. But the scar on Natalie's foot, and the way she curled it under herself as if to protect it, didn't lie.

Isabel had expected the Kabras to be the first to find the Clues. She had trained Ian and Natalie since birth to be the ruthless stars of the Cahill family. And at first, Ian had enjoyed it. The Clue hunt was the ultimate test of wits and daring, and there was little Kabras liked better than proving their superiority.

But the quest had been more heartless than even Ian had expected. With so much at stake, the competitors had started to see each other merely as obstacles, rather than real human beings. Ian and Natalie had been expected to do the same, and they'd seen a side of their mother that no one else in the world should ever have to. She'd almost turned them into killers. And while Ian wasn't necessarily a do-gooder or a saint, he knew that he wasn't a murderer.

It had taken them time — growing a conscience from scratch is hard going — but even Ian and Natalie could see that no prize was worth killing for. So they had, together with their other cousins, given their Clues to Amy and Dan Cahill. Amy and Dan were just kids themselves, but they were the only ones who could be trusted with such power. Those two Cahills didn't have ulterior motives; they didn't want to rule the world. Ian suspected they had only kept with the hunt to stop anyone else from winning and then using their power for evil. And to make their late grandmother proud, which was *so* Cahillish that Ian almost couldn't stand it.

Isabel had been furious with her children. She and their father had disowned them at the end of the hunt. It was a nasty business, all of it, and Ian found himself shivering at the memory. It wasn't normal to feel this way about one's mother. But he very much doubted that there were other mothers in the world like Isabel Kabra.

"Sir," said Bickerduff, interrupting Ian's panicked thoughts. "Your luggage has been sent to your room."

"Why?" asked Ian.

"For your trip to America, sir."

Of course. He would be going to America — to the same place where his mother would be, to the same place where Amy and Dan would be. Two Cahills and two Kabras in Boston. If Amy knew that Isabel was free, she might not want to see him. But why would it matter if Isabel were free or not? Ian was still the son of the woman who murdered Amy's parents. His stomach sank deep down inside of him. The Kabra charm was an impressive thing, but even Ian wasn't sure it could overcome a murder conviction.

"Bickerduff, I don't think I'm going to go."

"Of course, sir," said the butler.

Natalie stood up from her seat and folded her arms across her chest, almost as if she were hugging herself. "You don't suppose we'll get our allowance back?" she asked.

"Is that really what you're thinking?" he asked. Though, now that she mentioned it, he really wouldn't mind being put back into the Kabra good graces. Before the Clue hunt, Ian and Natalie had never wanted for anything, but now that they had proven to be such disappointments, they were quite impoverished. As co-winners of the Clue hunt, they'd been given a measly two million each, but he had a feeling that Natalie had been dipping into his share. Ian hadn't been raised as a Kabra for nothing, though. He'd had the family stockbroker's phone number memorized since childhood and he was parlaying two million into something far more respectable. Not that he was going to tell that to Natalie any time soon.

"And what are you thinking of? How sad Amy Cahill is going to be?" asked Natalie.

Ian paused. She would be sad to see Isabel out of jail. And she'd need someone to help her — someone more mature than her brother or that babysitter, Nellie. She'd need *him* to help her. If Ian found himself in trouble, he'd certainly appreciate having someone as suave and confident as himself to be there in support.

Bickerduff appeared in the door again. "Sir, your luggage has been returned to the box room."

"Why?" asked Ian. "I need to pack. I'm going to America soon! Fetch it, Bickerduff; we'll pack this evening."

"Very good, sir," said Bickerduff, turning and walking out again.

"You know she's not going to want to see you," said Natalie. "Our mother is the one . . . "

"Don't say it," he said. But Natalie was right. His mother's release put a kink into his plans. Maybe Amy would think he was spying for his mother or in league with her — but it wouldn't be like that at all. Amy would know that, right? She knew what he had done — what he had given up — at the end of the Clue hunt.

"Someone should say it," said Natalie. She shifted in her chair. "It's what I'm really thinking of. Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like if she hadn't gone to jail. If she hadn't — hadn't set that fire."

"Natalie, stop. Stop that." They shouldn't talk about it. Talking about it made it real, highlighted the horridness of the whole thing. If they kept on as things were, they could just pretend that their parents were off chasing down some piece of art, or sailing along some string of tropical islands.

"No, I'm just saying that sometimes I wonder. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if she'd been the kind of mother who had taken me to ballet and who had cheered at polo matches and hadn't, maybe, been the kind that expected . . . so much. From people."

The Kabras fell quiet. Ian wouldn't admit that he felt the same, sometimes. Only sometimes. A lot of the time.

"Just sometimes I miss her. Sometimes, I wish she had been different."

"Then . . . ," said Ian. "But then you wouldn't be you."

"I don't like me all the time," said Natalie.

"I don't like me all the time, either," he said. A quietness settled over the Kabras. A Kabra not liking him or herself, not thinking that all the stars had aligned to bring them to the brink of greatness, was unheard of. But, Ian thought, it was true.

"Bickerduff!" Ian called again.

"Yes, sir," said the butler.

"I'm not going," said Ian. "Cancel my flight."

"Very good, sir," said Bickerduff. The butler almost made it out of the room that time.

"No, wait," said Ian. He didn't know what to think, about his mother or Natalie or himself half the time, but he knew a few things, at least. Firstly, he wanted to go to Boston. And secondly, he was a Kabra, and Kabras got what they wanted. "Bickerduff, fetch my dinner jacket." If he was going to do this, he was going to do this right.



Amy Cahill was living in a madhouse.

Why had she never realized this before? The signs had been there — the running in the halls, the abundance of junk food, the crazy brother. But it was only at that moment, armed with a trash bag, that she realized just how far they had fallen. Anthropologists could come study her living room to learn about what the world would look like after the demise of modern civilization.

"Dan!" she yelled. "Why are your dirty socks in a bag of chips?!"

"They aren't!" Dan hollered back, running into the room. He had a plastic lightsaber in one hand and a dustpan in the other.

"Dan, I'm holding the proof in my hands right now," Amy said. She pulled the crumpled socks out of the chip bag, holding them between her forefinger and thumb. Boys were so gross.

"That's not a bag of chips," Dan said, poking at the bag of Doritos with his lightsaber. "That's an *empty* bag of chips."

"It's still gross," she said.

Just then, Atticus came running into the room. He held a mop and had a bath towel knotted around his neck. Amy was glad to have Atticus visiting — he was Dan's friend, and Dan needed all the friends he could get. He'd been so changed after the Clue hunt, like he didn't know what to do with himself anymore. Having Atticus around gave him someone to entertain, someone to be himself around. Plus, Atticus was a genius, which made him incredibly interesting to talk to.

Still, there was a line. She could be pleased that Dan had a friend. She could be equally displeased at dirty socks in bags of chips.

"Calceum amissum dabo ultionem meam!" Atticus roared, coming at Dan with the mop.

"No way, dude!" yelled Dan, leaping backward and lifting his dustpan like a shield.

"Dan," said Amy, shaking her trash bag at him. "Are you going to help at all?"

"Why are you cleaning in the first place?" Dan asked.

"Because we have company coming," she said. "I'm throwing out this bottle rocket."

"No, wait!" Dan said, reaching for it. "It hasn't been set off yet. Don't waste it, Amy. And we don't have *company* coming — we have Ian Kabra coming. And I know you want to totally impress him and take him to the movies and stare dreamily into his eyes —"

"I do not," Amy said, too quickly.

"Oh, Ian," Dan said, pressing his lightsaber to his chest and batting his eyes. "Tell me again about your shiny, shiny shoes."

"You're such a dweeb," said Amy, pitching the empty bag of chips into the trash bag.

Something about the scene in her living room struck her as strange — and then she realized why: It felt normal. Entirely normal. Right then, she was just a big sister, yelling at her little brother because

he was a mess. Was this how the rest of the girls at school spent their time? When Amy had signed herself and Dan up for the Clue hunt, she hadn't known how much her life would change. Before, she had just been a normal eighth grader with an annoying kid brother. But since the Clue hunt began, her life had been full of foreign countries and near-death experiences — being lost in the catacombs in Paris, flying to the top of Mount Everest, surviving that final gauntlet.

And now, at sixteen, she found herself wealthier than she knew any person in the world could be, and in possession of the key to the Cahill family's ultimate power. Her life was, to be blunt about it, insane.

Ian's visit was just another example of that insanity. He was rich and cultured and . . . ridiculous in a charming, interesting way. He wasn't like any of the other boys at Amy's school.

Like a magnet, the thought of school zapped Amy's thoughts toward one boy in particular. On the list of boys that Amy wanted to clean her living room for, Evan Tolliver was right at the top. The thought of him made her ears go hot, which probably meant they were bright pink, too. It was a strange thing, to be excited about one boy coming to visit while blushing over another.

"Ego regis spatium exterum cedo!"

"Not if I have anything to say about it, dastardly fiend!"

"Don't jump onto the ceiling fan!" Amy yelled.

Honestly, what was the point of being the leader of the most powerful family in the world if you couldn't even get your little brother to behave like a human being?



Dinnertime at the Kabra mansion had never been a particularly cozy affair. It was hard to have a family dinner when the table was as long as a swimming pool and the water glasses were made of real crystal.

Still, the night before Ian flew to visit the Cahills was the stoniest he could remember. Natalie sat silent and icy. Every clink of her fork against the china reverberated through the room like a gong.

Ian couldn't take it anymore. Natalie had been fuming ever since Ian had told her he would be going to see Amy. "Natalie," he began, but she cut him off before he could get any further.

"I can't believe you're going," she snapped. "I honestly can't believe that you are going to Boston to see the Cahills and that you are leaving me here alone. What am I supposed to do if she . . . if she . . . "Natalie's face screwed up like she was trying to shove an awful thought into the back of her brain. "What if she comes here and it's just me? Didn't you think of that? Didn't you think of me at all?"

Ian paused, and when he opened his mouth, he spoke slowly. "She can't . . . she can't leave America, Natalie. That would go against her parole. I've made sure. I checked."

"Oh, right, because she's clearly so good at obeying the law," said Natalie. She pushed her plate away. "If you go, and if she comes here, I'll never forgive you." She stood up and stomped out of the dining room, slamming the door hard enough to make the Waterford chandelier rattle on its chain.

Ian looked down at his plate. The filet with béarnaise sauce and fingerling potatoes had been prepared by a classically trained chef, and yet it tasted like sawdust to him. He felt a creeping, distasteful thing sneak up on him — sympathy. Those wretched Cahills. They'd changed him over the course of the Clue hunt, and now their unwanted effect lingered. Having a conscience was such a nuisance.

He'd have to make up with Natalie before he left. He didn't blame her at all for being nervous about Isabel leaving prison. He was nervous, too, and he wasn't even the one their mother had shot.

Ian picked his napkin out of his lap and followed Natalie out of the dining room.

"Natalie?" he called down the hall. But she wasn't there. And she wasn't in the gallery or in the theater or in the kitchen or the library. She wasn't in the conservatory or the study or her bedroom.

He was on his way to the parlor, passing the door to the secret wing of the mansion — the Lucian wing — when he heard the sound of shattering glass. "Natalie?" he said, putting a hand on the door. The knob was cool, and it twisted easily when he turned it. He stood there for a moment, looking at

the knob. He couldn't imagine that Natalie would go in there. They'd had an unspoken agreement to avoid it since the Clue hunt ended — avoid looking at it, talking about it.

But someone was in there. So Ian opened the door.

As soon as the door opened, a flood of lights streamed on one by one down the short hall as the chandeliers lit up. The floor was paneled in ebony wood, and the walls were lined with paintings of Lucians doing amazing things — being crowned, winning battles, ruling the world. It smelled of close air and dust; not even the servants had been inside. Ian felt as if he were trespassing, breaking the rules, even though that was ridiculous. This was his house, and with his father hiding in South America and his mother trapped in North America, there was no one present to scold or forbid him.

Slowly, he made his way down the hall. "Natalie?" he called again. But there was no answer.

At the end of the short hall was another door. He opened that one, to another hall. It had never occurred to him before how strange a setup this was. It was as if the wing were designed to be difficult to transverse — a series of rooms to be passed through, one by one, to reach an end destination, rather than one long corridor with doors along either side. Down at the end of the second hall, someone turned to look at him.

Someone tall, and someone who was not Natalie. The figure was all in black, from boots to mask. He couldn't tell for sure, but he was certain that the intruder smiled at him.

"Oi! Stop!" he yelled, taking off down the hall. The lights began to flicker, and the chandelier closest to his end of the hallway gave a shudder and then crashed to the ground, landing a few feet from Ian. Glass and metal shattered over the wood floors, spraying Ian with shards and splinters. If he had been any slower, he'd be buried under that mess, tangled in it like a grotesque knot in a skein of thread.

He half jumped, half skidded over the shattered chandelier and picked his way down the rest of the hall. But with a great groan, the second chandelier fell. Ian jumped out of the way, and continued his run down the hall, dodging the third and fourth chandeliers as their chains gave way and they slammed down to the floor.

Ian looked up at the last broken chain. A cable ran from the chain, along the ceiling, to the previous chandelier, and so on, until the cable reached the door. Something had triggered it; something had caused it to crash — the door opening. Someone had rigged the chandeliers to fall.

His spirit sagged down to his knees, dragging what felt like his lungs and all of his digestive organs with it. One of his parents had done that. Mother or Father, one of them — both of them — would rather have Natalie or himself be crushed by half a ton of glass and metal than have them make it through the wing and into the Lucian stronghold.

But there wasn't time to dwell on it. There was someone in the house, in *this* wing, and they needed to be caught.

Ian shook glass from his hair. The intruder had disappeared by the time he made it past the chandeliers. He barged through the next door.

It was the room made entirely of mirrors. Ian thought that Isabel had had it built because she liked to look at herself. Now he knew better.

A single lamp hung from the center of the mirrored room. And then, there was movement. The figure in black was there, though he couldn't tell where. He jumped at the reflection to his left, spun around to the one on his right. It was dark and the shadows tricked him; Ian could feel his heart pounding in his chest and his breath coming in quick bursts.

The intruder's image was cast all around him, but Ian couldn't tell which was the real person and which ones were reflections. The intruder was scrambling at one of the mirrors, clawing at the side of it as if trying to find a latch.

"Who are you?" he demanded. The figure in black spun around to look at Ian, and Ian finally thought he knew which way to go. He saw something that sparkled dangling from the intruder's hand — a piece of jewelry? Glass? But then the intruder grabbed a thick bar from his trouser leg — a pipe or a crowbar, Ian couldn't tell. He hesitated and stepped back, thinking he was about to be clubbed. But the intruder raised the bar and smashed the mirror. On the other side was a window that faced the garden. That was quickly smashed as well, and the intruder clambered outside.

Ian ran over, reaching out to try and grab a leg, an arm, something. They were on the top floor, and the intruder had already scampered up onto the roof.

There was no time to consider the three-story fall from the roof, or the fact that the intruder was apparently armed with at least a crowbar, or that Ian was supposed to be on a plane to America in a few hours. Ian grasped the window frame, put a foot on the ledge, and hoisted himself outside.

The night was cold for April, and it was much windier high up than it would have been on the ground. Ian's heart climbed rapidly to his throat when he realized what he was doing, but there wasn't any other way. By the time he found Bickerduff and had the police summoned, the intruder would be gone.

And if there was anything more important than catching them, it was knowing who they were. Anyone who was brave or foolish or desperate enough to break into the Lucian stronghold needed to be stopped.

Shifting his weight, Ian swung around and grabbed the gutter above him. It was slimy with rain, leaves, and grime, and the first realization that he could slip and fall hit him. But he bent his knees anyway, firmed up his grip, and jumped.

With a grunt, he swung one leg up above the gutter. He forced his weight into his stomach, pressing hard against the slick tiles. The figure in black was still trying to climb up the steeply pitched roof, and now that he heard Ian heaving himself upward, he scrambled all the harder.

He dug his fingers into the tiles, pulling his other leg up, and then he let himself have a moment to remember that he was still alive. But there was only time for a moment, and he was digging the toes of his Prada shoes into the roof to brace himself, to push higher and harder.

The wind whipped his hair into his eyes as he flung an arm out as far as he could to try and grab the intruder's trouser leg. He brushed the fabric with his fingers, but the person in black kicked at him. Ian took it in the shoulder, and he lost his grip. The movement caused the intruder to lose balance as well, and they both began to slide.

The tiles were too slippery to stop him; his sweater caught but it just tore beneath him. He tried to grab at something, but his hands couldn't grasp anything at all. His toes hit the gutter, which jolted under the impact. The intruder landed beside him. Ian tried to grab a black-garbed arm, but the gutter groaned again, and snapped.

They continued to fall. Ian grasped the gutter like a climbing rope, his clothes scraping down the side of the stone façade. He would have kept swinging — likely until the gutter broke completely free of the roof — but there was a tree growing close to the house and he got tangled up in the branches. The intruder skidded across the wall in the same way, but ended up near a downspout. He jumped over to it like a squirrel and began to skitter down to the gardens.

Ian kicked at the tree, trying to find a branch thick enough to stand on. He'd chased him that far — he'd not let him just get away now. He let go of the gutter with one hand and grabbed at a mess of sticks and leaves, hoping they would hold him as he pulled himself as quickly as possible into the tree.

Branches whipped at him as he scrambled down — he was going to look an awful mess whenever he caught up to this intruder.

There was movement beneath him, and Ian jumped, rolling into the person in black. They both toppled over, but both were soon back up on hands and knees. Ian lunged, grabbed a foot, and pulled. The person in black went down flat on his stomach. Ian snatched at the mask and ripped it off. And then he flung himself backward.

Isabel smiled at him and pushed her hair back from her face.

Ian felt as if he had been doused in ice water. His mother was there. There, in front of him. Isabel picked herself up from the ground and smoothed her black clothes with her hands. He shivered; his skin prickled up and down his back, and the first twinges of a headache crept over his brain.

Both sets of amber eyes flickered to the garden gate. It was old, made of damp, weathered wood and great iron bolts. The wall around the garden was a good ten feet high. There would be one way

out. One little door stood between Isabel and freedom. He shot to his feet, and he and his mother raced to the gate.

Ian beat her there, barely. He pressed his back against the wood and covered the latch with a hand.

"Step away from the door, Ian," said Isabel. She leveled her gaze at him, and Ian thought he might drop dead on the spot. It pierced him like a poisoned dart, like he would never stop bleeding.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "You're supposed to be in America."

"Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to, darling. Though I'm sure we'll be seeing each other soon," said Isabel. "Now, stand away from the door, Ian. I won't ask again."

He knew that he shouldn't. He knew that he should find some way to restrain her; he should get the police; he should send her back to jail. He should do that much for Amy and Dan, for himself and Natalie.

She looked at him in a way that made his throat close and his eyes water. Ian Kabra did not *cry*, but he thought in that minute he might. She was steel and he was paper and she tore right through him.

But if he stopped her, she'd go back to prison. There would be no more parole, no more Isabel loose in Boston.

Amy would be so happy. She'd be so proud.

He'd never have to worry that Isabel would show up again.

She'd never show up again. For a birthday, a polo match . . . anything.

Perhaps his conscience was too new; he hadn't used it enough yet to know how to use it properly.

Perhaps he just wasn't good at doing the right thing.

Ian stepped away from the door.

Isabel smiled again, and swept past him. "Thank you, darling."

She opened the door, stepped through, and shut it behind her.



Shame swept over Ian like a tidal wave. He stared at the garden door, and it was hard to breathe. The realization of what he had done smacked him in the face and it was cold, like a block of ice. He jerked the door open and stumbled out into the street.

But there was no one there. Isabel had gotten away.

No. He'd let her go.

Ian looked back at the house. For the first time in his life, he didn't feel worthy of living there. He didn't deserve it.

Ian Kabra would never cry. But he did sit down on the ground, something else he thought he would never do, and put his face in his hands for just a moment. Somehow, he remembered to breathe. It was funny, how you could keep breathing when you just made the biggest mistake of your life.

In the mansion, he found Natalie in the library.

"What on earth happened to you?" she gasped. "Your trousers!"

"I went into the . . . the Lucian wing."

Natalie's head jerked backward like he'd just told her he'd be wearing flannel and denim from now on. "Why?" she asked.

"I thought I heard someone in there."

"Did you?" she asked, gripping the arm of the chair she sat in. Natalie could be a nuisance; she could be tiresome and petulant. But she looked so small and scared, like an actual little sister, that he couldn't bring himself to let her know that her nightmares were coming true.

"No," he said. "It was nothing."

"Then why do you look like that?" Natalie asked.

Ian looked down at his clothes. He was covered with tiny bits of glass dust. The toes of his polished leather shoes had been reduced to unintentional suede. His sweater was gashed through across his stomach, and his polo shirt was stained an ugly greenish brown.

"I took a walk in the gardens," he said.

"All of that happened from a walk in the gardens?"

"You know I'm not the outdoorsy type. Good night."

He left the library and wandered to his room.

He could never tell Amy, and he couldn't go to America. It would be too much to bear, a secret too heavy for the airplane to lift across the ocean.

And the more he thought about it, the angrier he grew with himself. Making the right choice — the good choice — should have been so easy. He could see that now. All it would have meant was saying no to Isabel.

Stand aside, she would have said. And Ian would have said no.

I'm not asking again, she would have said. And Ian would have said no.

But he hadn't said anything at all. And, worst of all, his mother hadn't even expected him to. Isabel had known how weak he would be.

How could feelings be this complicated? He liked Amy; she was so simply good. So smart, and so sweet, and so pretty, for someone with such a limited wardrobe. But, strangely enough, he loved his mother.

Amy wouldn't like him anymore after this. What would she think if she knew? That he was a Kabra through and through, just like they'd all always thought. That no good could come of him. But what right did she have to think ill of him? She didn't know how hard it was to have a mother like Isabel. She didn't know the pressure, the pain, the constant expectations.

She didn't have any idea of what it was like to be a Kabra. She and that brother of hers just stumbled in and out of life's biggest challenges, making it out alive because of a bit of luck and the kindness of others — like himself.

He doubted that she could so much as say her own name without stuttering, or tie her shoes without being racked with uncertainty. It was pathetic, and just another example of how far removed from his world she was, monetary wealth or no.

And he knew that none of that was true, at all.

He grabbed for the phone. It was a miserable thing, to be responsible for breaking your own heart.



Amy was having a great afternoon. She'd made up the bed in the guest room and painted her nails, and now that all of her tasks for the day were done, she found that she couldn't sit still. She perched on the couch, but then wandered to the kitchen, and then outside, and then back to the living room. It was as if a tiny motor had kicked on behind her stomach and it was powering little wheels that ran all over her arms and legs, gears turning and turning and making energy that needed to be used.

She wondered if this was what it felt like to be Dan.

Back in the kitchen, Nellie was whipping up a batch of macaroons while jamming out to her iPod. Sometimes, Amy thought Nellie forgot that there were other people around. Every now and then she'd stop in her stirring to use the spoon as a guitar, and she'd wail out a few licks.

Dan wandered in and took a good look at Nellie. The buzz from her music could be heard across the kitchen. "Nellie," he said, "Atticus and I are going to eat Doritos and Pixy Stix for dinner. Cool with you?" He shot her a thumbs-up.

"And you used my heart as a Kleenex," Nellie sang. "But you're the one full of snot!"

"Awesome," Dan said, pulling out a bag of chips — only for Nellie to smack him in the chest with a carrot.

Amy's cell phone buzzed in her back pocket and she answered it quickly.

"Hello," she said.

"Amy." It was Ian. Amy grinned, biting her lip when her stomach flopped over. He really did have a great accent.

It's Ian, Amy mouthed to Nellie. Nellie, still dancing, gave her an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

"OooOOoooh," said Dan, squeezing his carrot tight.

Nellie grabbed for Amy's hand and tried to dance with her while she was on the phone. It was so silly, but Amy couldn't help but to give in. She held the phone with one hand, letting Nellie spin her around with the other. "All — all set to come over and visit? I've Dan-proofed the whole place."

"Dan-proofed. Is that supposed to be clever?"

Amy stopped dancing, and she let go of Nellie's hand. Nellie took her earbuds out and gave her a funny look, but Amy blushed and looked away.

"Ian, is everything, uh, okay?" she asked.

"Of course," he said quickly. "I've decided to stay in London. Everything is perfect."

Amy's stomach dropped. "You're staying — you're . . . you're not coming anymore?" Dread crept over her like a swarm of beetles. She was acutely aware of Nellie and Dan watching her from the other side of the kitchen.

"Is that disappointment I hear, Amy Cahill? How very quaint. I'd no idea you were so attached to the idea of playing house."

"Wh-why are you saying —"

"What is that? I can't understand you."

"Ian, I — c-can you come some other time? Maybe?"

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she hated herself for it. Ian was being a jerk, and she still wanted him to come? How pathetic could she get?

Ian paused, and Amy bit her lip. Why would he change his mind the day before he left?

"No," he said, finally. Amy's face fell. Her shoulders slumped in and she turned away from Dan and Nellie.

"Oh," said Amy. She didn't want to sound disappointed. She didn't want him to know how sad she was. But Amy really wasn't a very good liar. "Well, okay. But, Ian, if something is wrong—"

"Why would I tell *you* if something were wrong?" he snapped. She felt the sting from an ocean away. "What makes you think that you know anything about me at all, Amy? What makes you think I would tell you anything?"

This was not what she had been practicing since she found out he was coming. She'd even learned to make tea the real way, not by heating up some water in the microwave and dropping in a tea bag and then forgetting about it.

"I'm going to hang up now," she said quietly.

"Fine."

"Good-bye, Ian," she said.

He paused again. She thought she heard something like a sniff or a choke, but it was probably the sound of him tearing up his plane ticket. "Good-bye, Amy."

She hung up the phone. Dan and Nellie were quiet.

"Well, think about it," said Dan. "Did you really want Natalie Kabra as a sister-in-law?"

"Okay, take the Doritos and go," said Nellie, taking her carrot back and throwing the bag of chips at him. Dan caught the bag, looked between Nellie and his sister, and decided that any other place in the world was better than that kitchen. "What did he say?" Nellie asked.

"He can't come," said Amy. "He didn't say why. He wouldn't say why." She shouldn't have been so upset. She shouldn't have felt like someone had jabbed a pin into her feelings and deflated them all over the kitchen floor.

Nellie plopped into a kitchen chair and shook her head. "That stinks," she said. Amy shrugged. "I mean, it stinks whenever someone cancels on you, but it's even worse when you like the guy."

"I don't like him," Amy said immediately, folding her arms across her chest. "I just did so much work to get ready for him to come over from London and now I'm just upset that, you know, the house is clean for no good reason."

"Oh, Amy," said Nellie. "You don't like him. And my favorite band *isn't* Single Cell Paramecium. You can trust me, kiddo. That's what I'm here for."

"I just don't get it," said Amy, sitting down beside Nellie. She put her phone on the table and stared at it. "I mean, did I do something? Am I . . . unvisitable?" Something prickled at her eyes. "He just turned so mean on the phone. It's like between a few days ago and today he just decided that I'm something worthless. Like he can't even stand to talk to me." She wiped the back of her palm across her cheek. "It's stupid. I feel stupid. I feel stupid for wanting him to come, and for being so . . . excited, and I feel stupid for crying."

"It's not stupid," said Nellie, handing Amy a napkin. "Your feelings are never stupid."

Amy pushed the napkin against her eyes. "What did I do wrong?"

"Oh, Amy, nothing. Look, there's a lot of truth to the statement 'It's his loss.' I mean, Amy Cahill, you are awesome. After all that you've been through, after how smart and capable and utterly exceptional you have proven yourself to be, anyone should feel privileged to know you. I know that I do."

Amy shrugged. She didn't feel exceptional or capable. She felt gullible, as if this whole thing had just been a joke to him — as if she were a joke. Amy reached for a new napkin and wiped at a fresh round of tears. "I just don't know what happened."

"Amy, if he can't see how awesome you are, then — I don't care how rich he is — he can't even buy a clue. And I'm not just saying that. As someone who is, like, alive because of your awesomeness, I mean, I speak with authority here. I am the law."

Nellie may have been right — but it still felt awful.

Amy hiccupped and scratched her nail along the top of the kitchen table. "The Kabras are *poor* now, Nellie," she said, adding a small smile.

Nellie threw back her head and laughed. "Poor. Gosh, those kids are going to have such a rude awakening one of these days. Look, Amy, would you ever let someone treat me that way? Or treat Dan that way?"

"No."

"Then don't let anyone treat you that way, either. No more tears now? Good — you kill me when you do that. Amy, let me be old and wise for a minute. There are boys who will make you cry, and then there are boys who are worth spending your fabulous energy on. What about that boy from class? Ethan or something?"

"Evan," Amy said automatically.

"Ah," said Nellie, grinning. "I knew you'd know who I meant. Forget Ian Kabra and his shiny hair and polo shirts. Think of you, Amy. Do you want to give someone like Evan a call?"

"Call?" said Amy, her mouth dropping open a little bit. Call a boy? And say what? Calling boys was something that only superheroes could do, or something.

"Yes, call. Ring. Telephone. Buzz." Nellie stood up and slid the cell phone over toward Amy. "Think about it." And then she left.

Amy watched her go. It was a thought. But could she, Amy Cahill, really call a boy?

Could Amy Cahill brave an underground catacomb full of bones? Could Amy Cahill survive a cave-in? Could Amy Cahill fly to the top of Mount Everest in a helicopter so light that a sneeze could knock it over?

Actually, Amy thought, yes, she could. So, obviously, she could call a boy.

Amy went to her room for some privacy and scrolled through her phone. Evan had given his number to her when they had worked on a science project together. She sat on the edge of her bed, her stomach flipping back and forth like an antsy pancake as she pushed the numbers.

And then it was ringing.

"Hello?"

"Hi," she said. "Evan? Hi, it's Amy Cahill." She paused, and smiled. "You're glad I called? So am I."

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011943444

Copyright © 2011 by Scholastic Inc.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, THE 39 CLUES, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

Clifford Riley would like to acknowledge Christina McTighe.

Cover design by Keirsten Geise; Rapid Fire logo design by Charice Silverman First edition, December 2011

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON · M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141 Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

e-ISBN 978-0-545-45199-4